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**An Athletic Director’s Greatest Legacy: To Enable Quality Coaches to Impact Young People**

Quality people create success! Quality people working together create greater success. Administrators/Athletic Directors that help create and grow this type of environment are tremendous assets to their district because they provide the necessary leadership in acquiring people who become role models, resources, and mentors that hold kids accountable These coaches/teachers are challengers, encouragers, and inspirations. They move their student-athletes to be better people, better learners, better leaders, and better citizens. The vehicle they do this with varies, but some of the constants are that they build relationships, care about their well-being of their athletes, and have zeal to continue to learn and grow. Coaches today must do this in a time in which more and more is scrutinized both personally and professionally. It seems to be a time of heightened negativity from society, communities, and parents. It is a time of unmatched cynicism and almost a hope for failure by many observers. I try hard to get my coaches to embrace these challenges by continuing to focus on positives, the controllable things, and most of all, the kids. I also try to measure coaches to see if they want this burden of responsibility. If they don’t, their time in this profession will be short and bitter. If they do, then I feel they have an outstanding foundation from which to build a long, healthy, productive career in education and in the lives of kids. We continually provide high expectations of our student-athletes and I want the same attitude and expectations of our coaches. One of those expectations is to conduct one’s self with dignity and pride in school, out of school, and away from school.

I work hard to get to know my coaches so that I can do the best job of serving their styles/needs. With that said, however, I want my coaches to be the driving force behind their programs so that they own the foundation, philosophy, and direction of the program and are able to get all of their stakeholders on board. I want to develop, challenge, and move the current coaches we have so that they find satisfaction in their job and embrace the never-be-complacent culture in which we believe. I want to move them out of their comfort zones just like I want them as coaches to move their athletes out of comfort zones. I also strive to incorporate the idea that we need to embrace the journey more than the product. We need to model what we want our athletes to do and be, just as we do with shouldering the burden of responsibility in how we conduct ourselves. Results matter but they only really matter if the proper process is followed. Much of society has become too much of an “accolades-based” audience rather than a learning-oriented participant. I want our coaches and our athletes to value the preparation more than the game. I want them to value it for the competition, the camaraderie and the accountability it provides. The culture created and fostered in the athletic department at Kimberly High School is one of passion, preparation, discipline, teamwork, respect, accountability, responsibility, energy, resiliency, and humility. These are all components of a healthy and thriving community and it is how I measure the success of Kimberly athletics. It’s how we define “CHAMPIONSHIP”.

The facts are that I must hire and retain quality individuals in order for us to have any chance in our athletic programs at Kimberly High School to positively impact kids over the long haul. Once hired, I must help develop and assess/evaluate coaches. In order to do this, I need to build quality relationships with the coaches, know what makes them tick, articulate expectations and any changes clearly, and prioritize both each individual’s needs and the collective needs of the department so that there is some balance as well as progression moving forward. It is important that I walk the tight-rope of professional relationship vs. personal relationship. Sometimes these relationships are rocky due to a tough conversation that needs to be had or a feeling from a particular coach that he/she is not getting the support they feel they deserve. With some, this is simple and with others more difficult. Like any relationship, the job of building the relationship is never done. It happens, as Susan Scott would say, “one conversation at a time.” These conversations need to be real, honest, “fierce” and consistent both in frequency and in manner. They need to be fostered so that they not only survive the difficult conversations but become stronger and better *because of* the difficult conversations. This process and project has helped me be more in tune with each coach’s personality, strengths, weaknesses, and desires. Knowing all of these things is critical to developing relationships. My legacy as an athletic director is directly related to the people that I hire and retain; the people that impact our student-athletes every day and represent our program whether they are coaching or not and whether they know it or not, so I try to make sure they know it. As I already mentioned, today’s coach deals w ith more cynicism, more second-guessers, and a need to be more responsible and accountable than any other period in history. With that said, though, I want coaches that know that what they are doing is one of the most responsible positions in society. Coaches that know that and see that as a privilege and a blessing are the coaches I want. They are the coaches that will work the hardest and impact the most lives. They are coaches who are selfless and kid-oriented, team-oriented, and service-oriented.

With this project, I wanted to accomplish two things: 1. I wanted to create a system that is consistent and clear for coaches. I want there to be a comfort level and clarity with the coach as to what is being “evaluated”, “assessed” and so forth. No different than a teacher articulating to students what is on the test, it is my job to let coaches know what things are most heavily weighted or valued by our department when it comes time to evaluate them. 2. I wanted coaches to first know themselves before they try to impact anyone else. I am adamant believer that you cannot help anyone else until your “own house is in order.” I want our coaches to be crystal clear on what they want out of themselves and what they want out of their program before they try motivating, challenging, influencing and impacting young men and women.

One big hurdle for me to try to tackle was making the evaluation part of the process and not a result of the outcome. I want conversations and I want coaches to know that dialogue and development go hand in hand. Improvement, learning, growing, and winning are messy, uncomfortable, and difficult places to be at times. That is the cost of it all. If one is not willing to go through things that make them feel that way, then they are not meant to be a coach at the high school level. I have emphasized to coaches that there doesn’t “come a time” when I evaluate you. I am evaluating you all the time as you should be me. Evaluating, assessing, learning, and growing should be part of life no different than breathing. There is not a “time” that you will be observed and then that time stands by itself. Coaches are evaluated every second they are “in the arena” by parents, fans, students, neighboring communities’ fans, opponents, officials, and the list goes on. This should not be pressure but a reminder that we are accountable and we will be held responsible by many different factions of people with varying motives. This is why we must be in touch with ourselves, our own goals, and our program’s mission as well as our department’s mission. Our coaches should also know that we have a support system in place to help coaches develop. This is developing and needs to be communicated even more to all coaches, but we are slowly but surely getting to the place I want to be with that. This will take time, but it will benefit everyone that subscribes to it and make our department a better place to be. The way we behave, act, react, converse (with our athletes, officials, and anyone else) is who we are. *That person* is someone I want our athletes to respect, emulate, and remember in a manner that is positive. The evaluation then becomes part of the greater picture. Some people take this as pressure, whereas I believe the exact opposite. I believe that it brings out a truer, more meaningful distinction of who we are, what we do, and the impact we are making. We are all going to make mistakes, say something wrong, make a bad decision, or act in a manner we may regret. The way I see it is we must fix it. Others hope that this isn’t on the evaluation. Too often I have heard and even been a part of the results-based evaluation. Team has a winning season, or one that is of improvement from past seasons, and there is a quality evaluation for the head coach. Team struggles, has problems, regresses in the W-L column from the previous season, receives a few parent phone calls and the head coach’s evaluation is marked with more areas of improvement. Now, this may very well be the case, but this unspoken trend threatens mightily any chance of having a community within the athletic department if it lacks merit and reeks of “win at all costs” mentality. It diminishes the “community” component. If it fosters the “win at all costs” mentality, then it certainly goes against the deep philosophy of process over product. It minimizes the process and accentuates the product.

The process I have come up with might seem to present more work on behalf of the head coach and some more time occasionally by all coaches and the athletic director involved, but I subscribe to the idea that it will save time and energy dealing with distractions. I also believe that anything worth having takes time and energy. When dealing with people and building relationships, I do not want to take shortcuts. I don’t want to overwhelm our coaches with meetings, but I do want to provide time to listen to each other, learn from each other, and make sure that the mission of each respective program continues to be fertilized and that it aligns not only with the coaching staff’s vision, but with the athletic departments larger vision. The steps in this process will provide all parties with a clearer sense of what is happening and is what is planning to happen with players, programs, and with other components of the program. It makes to goals of each program more real, and something that can be discussed, measured (at times), and more satisfying when realized. We are ridding ourselves of times in which the discussion points could have been covered in a memo, email, or short video for the coach to watch at his/her discretion. We are removing much of the “gray” area when a parent or athlete questions the rationale for a decision. The “Why?” is answered in everything we do. This is the goal. We are meeting to get better together, to get to know each other more, to share, converse, and build relationships….one conversation at a time. These conversations then become real, genuine, purposeful, and productive. They are not window dressing, but the reality of what we want: Championship.

**Taking Care of Our Greatest Assets**

I encountered several pieces of research in going through this transformation that have helped me create a “system” that works for me. *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott was outstanding and continues to be a resource that I use. I have shared this book with a couple of coaches and will continue to do so. I have read several quality articles in ASCD Educational Leadership. I have had conversations with my superintendent as well as my principal not to mention conversations with fellow athletic directors. I had phenomenal conversations with Jim Adam, one in particular on developing a culture of collaboration and growth and read an article he shared with our class regarding “Appreciative Inquiry. Along with that talk and article, I had some wonderful talks with Tom Krause, who has a strong belief and background with strength-based living. I also utilized my own experiences as a head coach for the past fifteen plus years and some of the strategies/philosophies that I use to build relationships with my coaches, student-athletes and parents. This research and reflecting has helped grow me as a communicator, learner, and leader.

The most notable pieces that I gained from Susan Scott were affirmation of having honest conversations, ground-based truth, and a few strategies/templates to use for various conversations, most notably, a real attempt to make meetings productive, efficient, and focused. First, the affirmation that I received from Scott’s points was awesome. I am a pretty straightforward guy, and though, that needs to be tempered at times, I was relieved a bit to read Scott’s words: “it is the unreal conversations that should scare us to death” (xv), and “Sometimes we put so many pillows around a message that the message gets lost altogether” (144), and “Our radar works perfectly. It is the operator who is in question” (166). These are refreshing points and ones I refer to periodically to remind myself about the purity of a real conversation. I continually get better with these but always need to be refocused on the purpose of conversations: to build relationships that improve the development of the coaches and student-athletes in our programs.

Scott makes a point in Chapter 1 that hit me hard. It was moving to say the least. She distinguishes between “official truth” and “ground truth”. “Ground truth is discussed around the water cooler, in the bathrooms, and in the parking lot, but it is seldom offered for public consumption and rarely shows up when you need it most—when the entire team is assembled to discuss how to introduce a new product or to analyze the loss of a valuable customer and figure out how to prevent it from happening again.” “Official truth” is what is said to be happening but rarely is accurate. It typically is the safe discussion, conversations, or “wishful thinking”(21-39). In order for a relationship and department to truly flourish, ground truth needs to be heard, understood, and dealt with. Without this seemingly very basic reality, we are dealing with pseudo truths.

Joe Ehrmann has been another influence on my style, foundation, and believe system as a coach, A.D., father, teacher, and person. Referred to as one of the most influential coaches in America, I read a book several years ago about him by Jeffrey Marx titled, *Season of* Life, and I was instantly drawn in. Drawn in by a person who seemed to “get it”; someone who had encountered some very large struggles in his life, had gone down a wrong path, learned from it, and offered a refreshing perspective of what is really important. He framed many of his examples around sports, but it was more about how to treat people. It was more about life! Among many other points, Ehrmann classifies coaches as transitional and transformational. They are at both ends of the spectrum and provide a nice opportunity for coaches to reflect on which one they are. He defines the transitional coach in a very detailed, powerful way: “Transitional coaches are the kinds of coaches who use players as tools to meet their personal needs for validation, status, and identity. They held their power over us to elicit the response they wanted. I obeyed these coaches out of necessity but I never accepted their believe systems or bought into their programs. Coach first, team second, and player’s growth and needs last, if at all, were their modus operandi (5).” This is eerily accurate and something I have witnessed firsthand as an athlete, coach, and most recently as an Athletic Director. I see it frequently, especially with the growth of clubs and private lessons, money-making, travel teams, and tournaments. The fact that society is very much a “me first” society has made this even more present, I think, because people are looking for credentials of people they send their children to. If done correctly, but oftentimes, the credentials parents tend to look for and listen to is how many national tournaments a travel team coach has been to, how many state tournaments they have won, and other trivial things that at the core, make very little difference.

On the other hand, the transformational coach, as Ehrmann explains, is dedicated to self-understanding and empathy, viewing sports as a virtuous and virtue-giving discipline. Transformational coaches believe young people can grow and flourish in sports in a way that is more liberating and instructive than can be achieved through almost any other activity (6-8). These are the coaches I am trying to attract, hire, and keep. We have a bunch of them right now and I know for certain they make a huge impact not only on their own student-athletes and programs but on the entire student body in some ways. There is no doubt that I want transformational coaches touching the lives of the student-athletes here at Kimberly. In the long run, they win! They are champions because they help students win in life.

A strategy in which I have been turned on to by Jim Adams is “appreciative inquiry.” Through this concept, an organization, school, or department becomes a strength-based, positive, progressive, powerful unit as opposed to a break-me-down, gotcha, fearful, fractured group. This intrigues me. It makes sense, is “simple”, and gives me great confidence that if we incorporate this into our fabric, we will continue to ascend in Kimberly. It is not something we have to do, are supposed to do, or even are expected to do. It is not something that is going to be on my evaluation, will get me into or out of hot water. Rather, it is who we are. My way of thinking has changed through this reading and changes my vision for my department. This, combined with my conversations with Associate Director of Literacy Training in Pulaski, Tom Krause, have deepened my knowledge of the “strength-based” methodology, yes, but also had me asking for more. More examples. More explanations. More clarification. More strategies as to how to incorporate. Many of the nuggets from these conversations have made their way into my meetings, my vision, and essentially, into our athletic department.

Described below, I walk through what my “process” is, though it is ever-evolving. One can see that I try to balance the human component with the necessary documentation/evaluation/assessment component. My main aim is to eliminate the cold and structured feeling of the evaluation and make it a feeling of community, growth, and goal-setting. I also want to make sure conversation and reflection are a key component of our lives in the athletic world. I want to eliminate the conversation that ends the minute it is done and turn it into one conversation in a multitude of conversations we have as the building blocks of who we are and what we do. This is a difficult juggling act, but one that I thoroughly believe in and will foster over time. I want the core of this to be developing people/coaches as well as providing coaches with feedback, information, and peers with whom they can confide. I want, in essence, a community of coaches that share with each other, reflect with each other, root for each other, learn from each other, believe in each other, and most importantly, care about each other. This will allow our coaches, I believe, to continue to grow and attain the maximal amount of enjoyment in the profession, therefore impacting the most number of kids possible in a life-changing, impactful manner. It also provides us with a chance to heighten the impact because we will be practicing what we preach: community/team, lifelong learning, and the process being the real joy.

**Plan**

I have a vision statement that goes something like this:

To be a Champion, one must be:

Passionate, Prepared, Disciplined, Respectful, Accountable, Responsible, Energetic, Resilient, Humble, and Team-Oriented.

Our athletic department and programs will strive to embody these characteristics every single day. Championship means doing things the right way, enjoying the process, and never allowing wins or anything else get in the way of the fact that relationships with the student-athletes are the deal. We will not apologize for striving for excellence nor will we sacrifice our integrity for a ‘win’. We will not measure success by hardware, rather we measure success by cultivating a process-driven behavior and attitude. This will transfer to any field or endeavor our student-athletes leave Kimberly High School with.

In carrying out this vision, we must, as an athletic department, have full staff meetings, individual meetings, professional learning opportunities, and consistent times in which we reflect, both collectively and individually. We must also find time to improve what we are doing while appreciating what we have. We must be our own greatest critic, but also our own biggest fans and celebrate successes. We must tap into the strengths of each person to utilize the strength of the whole. We must use synergy to create some of the greatest things that we can in terms of opportunities for our student-athletes. We must have high expectations for our student-athletes that are delivered to our kids in a clear, consistent manner. We must not try to be popular but we need to be sincere. We must work as hard or harder than our student athletes so that we are always staying ahead of the game and continuing to be voracious learners. Above all, we must be consistent in our approach and diligent in our process.

My process begins with the evaluation process for varsity head coaches. Coaches will get formally evaluated every other year. This will consist of several components with each component serving a specific purpose.

1. Coaches will receive reflective questions that they review prior to a thirty to forty-five minute meeting (see attached). My role at this time is to listen and ask questions to gather valuable information and coax the coach to reflect. “A coaching relationship isn’t about providing a quick fix or a recipe for success. Rather, the most powerful relationships focus on reflecting, exploring, analyzing, and digging deeper into good practice. ..we hope to change reflections into insights, expand knowledge into wisdom, and evoke changes in behavior that improve performance” (Bearwald 74). This conversation allows me to better evaluate the coach’s “place” and performance, in addition to my observations throughout the season, discussions throughout the season, and other experiences I have with that coach. The evolution of the coach is key to then help direct/lead the coach to greater things, which will not only gratify the coach but will impact student-athletes. I have evolved in this portion and become a better, more effective leader in
2. Next, I read and process these reflections and this conversation and combine it with all the other information I have gathered over the period of time between evaluations (two years). This includes all meetings and conversations with the coach, goal-setting we have done over these two years and those results, practice observations, game observations, observations at camps, feedback received from athletes in the program, feedback from parents of athletes in the program, feedback from asst coaches, and feedback from staff.
3. Third, coaches will receive a self-evaluation tool to complete with spots for comments, etc. This is an extremely valuable component, because, like the reflective questions, it allows the coach to reflect on key components of his or her coaching and, in essence, evaluate himself including documentation if he/she chooses. This relates directly to the success of his/her program because it deals with the entire process and not just wins and losses or how many players received scholarships.
4. At the same time, but independently, I provide my feedback to the coach in written format in preparation for the third step. The purpose of this part of the evaluation is to celebrate the coach, use appreciative inquiry, and continue the coach moving forward.
5. Once completed, we meet a second time to compare notes and celebrate successes, goal-set and move forward. Out of this meeting, I also want to send the coach with positive thoughts and excitement and energy going forward. I also want to provide the coach with some feedback that may help direct him/her to what his/her goal might be for the upcoming year. Because coaching has essentially become a year-round job, I want my coaches to know that there is value in reflecting and just as we expect of our student-athletes, to be life-long learners. This goal must be clear and purposeful as well as measurable and it is my job to help each coach accomplish this (both the documentation of the goal and accomplishing the goal).
6. The final component is the follow through by the coach and by me. In future discussions, we need to discuss the progress of hear what they are doing, how they are doing it and measure their success. This is where relationships grow and develop one conversation at a time. It is where ground truth and official truth become consistent. It is where the playing field is level, productive, and enjoyable. Competitive but enjoyable. It is where the process is at work and success is a byproduct.

On years when there is a formal evaluation plan in place, there are a few more steps in place for the coach to self-reflect, which will hopefully take our conversations to a great level. The set-up for this process looks like:

1. Reflective questions (Optional)
2. Conversation on reflective questions. I basically take notes and get any of my questions answered (Optional)
3. Coach completes self-assessment and submits to A.D.
4. A.D. completes assessment on coach prior to getting/reviewing coach’s self-assessment. A.D. then compares the two and puts them side-by-side to be discussed at next meeting with coach.
5. Conversation about two assessments and celebrate positives and successes; note areas not in line.
6. Coach writes goal for self for next calendar year.
7. Ongoing (fierve) conversations

On years in which there is no formal evaluation, there are still conversations of course, and there is continual goal-setting and professional development. It looks like this:

1. Reflective questions
2. Potential discussions on reflective questions depending on coach, situation, etc.
3. Goal-setting (with a map)
4. Staff meeting (either pre-season or post-season) (create, tweak, alter map)
5. Continue to get better.
6. Ongoing (fierce) conversations

**Resources**

My style and philosophies have been developed over the years through personal experiences, readings, discussions, introspection and reflection, feedback, and trial and error. I base my relationships with people on a central trust, communication, and the idea that we will work together to get better. I want these evaluations to be as natural as possible but also as consistent and “clean” as possible so as to have the utmost credibility and effectiveness. I also strive to better understand ways to meet the needs of different people, learning styles, etc.

**Reflection**

This journey has been awesome. It has improved me as an athletic director in many ways, but most importantly has reemphasized the fact that we must continue to build relationships, have conversations, and improve. It challenges my thinking daily and no doubt will continue to do so. There is no one way to do something like this. In dealing with over seventy coaches, nineteen of them regularly, I need to remain flexible yet consistent, fair but not equal, and transparent but not breaching confidentiality. I have become stronger, more rational (I hope I was never irrational), and better equipped for conflict. I have become a better communicator. I have asked more questions than I ever have, and I have always been a question-asker. I have tried numerous things to promote our programs and coaches; things that I never would have even thought of one or two years ago and I love it. I love growing and getting better and know that I am a lifelong learner. This project will live on every day as I strive to help coaches grow and have them helping me grow. Together, we will continue to be the best athletic department (as defined throughout) we can be.

Evaluation/Development Process

Twitter (bringing coaches together)

Coaching staff/department meals (bringing coaches together)

Papermaker Pizza, Planning and Processing Party (bring coaches and athletes together)

Strength and Conditioning Aggregate Plan (Bringing coaches, athletes and programs together)

Wall of Athletes

Various professional development opportunities

Championship Coaching Playbook